

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



May 18, 2023

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[Translation]

EDUCATION

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Premier and his team campaigned on the need to remove politics from education. I would like to share some components of the Conservative platform under the section entitled “Energizing Education”. The Premier and his team said that they wanted to have education decisions made by teachers in classrooms, not politicians in Fredericton. During the first year of its mandate, the Conservative government would introduce the Teacher Freedom Act, which would empower teachers and principals to make decisions on how best to reach the learners in their community. The Premier and his team would consult teachers and parents. Could the Premier explain to us and everyone here why this commitment from his platform was abandoned? What changed?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, what we did not campaign on was removing parents from the program. We campaigned for parents needing to be a part of the educational system. And what we wanted in many discussions with the NBTA was to have teachers take control of the classrooms and to have teachers take control of the curriculum. When the commissioners’ report was done, the language report on education, it proved the situation that exists in the Anglophone system. We wanted the NBTA to take control of that and to help us to develop a curriculum that actually works for teachers.

So, Mr. Speaker, this whole concept of letting the teachers control the curriculum—letting teachers control the classrooms—is not new. It is something from the very beginning. I would welcome the opportunity. In fact, we could put that motion forward now, because that is what is needed. We need people, such as those with AEFNB, who model a system that works. We need that same structure in the English system, and the NBTA needs to be part of it.

[Translation]

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, I want to continue reading through the Premier’s election platform. He said that the Premier’s Office ends up making all the decisions and that the voices of citizens are not allowed to be as strong as they could and should be. He said that this meant he would keep on listening to people and that he would answer their questions and concerns online.

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[Original]

So, consultations were held with more than 2 800 New Brunswickers back in 2021 and 2022, and New Brunswickers, parents, and community members shared their recommendations for education governance. At the time, the minister's goal aligned with the Conservative platform commitment to get politics out of education and reduce the powers of the Premier and minister to set curriculum and to interfere in education.

The proposed model, which is on the floor today with Bill 46, does not match the Premier's campaign rhetoric nor that of the people he committed to listen to in the consultations. Can the Premier tell us what has changed?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, as I said a few minutes ago about wanting to have the NBTA take control of the classrooms... The deputy minister who went into the education system came from the NBTA to do just that, but it was not turning out to be just that. All the issues that arose during the review of our education system were clearly identified. They were about classroom situations, the streaming—all those issues that were not being addressed as part of the changes in education. The focus was on relooking at how it would work and what would need to happen, but that was not happening. So now the goal is: How do you make it happen? How do we get the NBTA...

Let's go back to that, because I remember... And the member is not here today, Mr. Speaker. Sorry.

But the idea to look at the NBTA... I remember that particular member saying that it was not his problem as the President of the NBTA. Well, it is time that we all stood up, because this is a problem for us all. So I welcome the changes being proposed by the Leader of the Opposition. Let's get on with it and make it work, Mr. Speaker.

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is interesting to hear the Premier proposing that the NBTA take responsibility for curriculum when there is a bill that overhauls education governance in order to give him more power to direct policy and curriculum, not what he just told us today.

Unfortunately, there are no records, comments, or reports from the consultations that were done on the governance in the Anglophone sector. It is lacking some transparency in the effort to consult. But we do understand, from participants who were there, that the broad theme was around the need to decentralize education governance, not only to give parents and communities an opportunity for input but also to give them authority over the system.

We understand that a governance model was presented that had 10 or 20 locally elected boards and then a provincial school board. That is what came forward based on the

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feedback from the people of New Brunswick, whom this Premier has offered to serve. Now a new model is up for review that does not match the feedback and that consolidates power in the Premier's Office. Why has the model changed?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition would like to think that all of this consolidates in the Premier's office. Well, it does not. I know that a lot of discussions are going on about all these types of issues. But the issue is around having consistency across, particularly, the Anglophone system.

I will say it again. We can learn a lot from the Francophone system in terms of how it is organized, how it is focused, how it develops programs, and how it implements those programs in a community and then across the network. We can also learn from the role that the AEFNB plays in all of that. This is not fiction—it is real.

So, how do we emulate that? How do we get that same focus and that same ownership in our English classrooms? How do we avoid the streaming? How do we have a system that... That was all laid out in the report that was done, Mr. Speaker, but it was not being followed. It was not being implemented. No action was being taken. Meanwhile, you know, the clock ticks.

So, we can talk about this, but we have seen a disconnect across the Anglophone system, from one district to another, with no continuity of purpose—no continuity of results. Mr. Speaker, the goal is to fix that, and the goal is to have teachers own this. We agree on that, so let's do it. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, it is hard to listen to the Premier describing the Francophone education system, which has a governance model based on the community and the voices of parents.

[*Original*]

Then he presents an Anglophone education governance system that is dramatically different from that, when I think that he had just said that he wants the Anglophone system to better reflect the Francophone system. But you have just split apart your two governance models, so I am wondering how you square that.

I would like to share a few more quotations from the Premier's introduction in the Conservative platform when he was referencing his time as Finance Minister. He specifically said, "I learned how our civil servants want to do so much more for our province" and how it is often politicians who hold them back. Now we hear him referencing the firing of the chief civil servant who was responsible for Education. He learned at the

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time that “you can help people with the right decision, and you can hurt people with the wrong decision.”

[Translation]

I want to know if the Premier is prepared to recognize that his decision to review Policy 713 has hurt people.

[Original]

Can he acknowledge that the review of Policy 713 hurts people?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I think that we have been very clear in relation to Policy 713. One of the things we are learning is that one of the major groups that have not been talked to much is parents. Parents still want to take control and have responsibility over their kids—not the state, and not the province. I think that we could reference the former Minister of Education. He thought and stated that it was actually the province that needed to take responsibility for the kids. We do not believe that. We believe that it is actually the parents who need to have that responsibility.

So the discussions around Policy 713 are directly related to the control and the knowledge that parents have on what their kids are learning, what their kids are doing, and how they are progressing as they mature. The discussions also talk about sports and how that works with the new transgender society that we live in. We can be respectful, we can understand the issues, and we can make things work for everyone. Then there are discussions on the curriculum with respect to what is being taught to kids—to have parents really know about that. Mr. Speaker, this review is very limited to the issues at hand.

[Translation]

HOUSING

Mr. J. LeBlanc (Shediac—Beaubassin—Cap-Pelé, L): Mr. Speaker, Bill 53 will enable the Minister responsible for Housing to transfer surplus Crown property to municipalities for housing. Even though this is a positive step, the process of municipalities acquiring surplus property can be complicated. Can the minister explain to us how she will be involved in this process and how she will expedite the process of transferring these properties?

[Original]

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am meeting with the stakeholders—the municipalities, the regional service commissions, the not-for-profits,

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and the different groups that are all involved in trying to work on the housing crisis here in New Brunswick. They are all contributors to the solutions that we have in front of us. We have all discussed issues around provincial lands.

Mr. Speaker, this government has recognized that we need to do better with how we take care of our properties within the province. The Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure and I are working together very closely on looking at the surplus properties that we have within the provincial purview. We understand that some of these properties will be ideal for housing in New Brunswick. We are working together very closely to be aligned so that we can propose changes to make properties for housing more available. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. J. LeBlanc (Shediac—Beaubassin—Cap-Pelé, L): Mr. Speaker, if the minister is aware that a government building may become vacant and surplus property, will the minister commit to engaging with the local government where the property is located well in advance of the time that it becomes vacant so that plans can be developed for repurposing it?

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I will not only commit but also say that when I was the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, I put legislation in place that would allow us to make those transfers happen in a much more timely and seemly way—in a faster way. That is why it is very important that the New Brunswick Housing Corporation and the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure work together very closely so that we can be aligned and identify the properties that are available for housing.

Mr. Speaker, we have built very strong relationships with our municipalities and not-for-profits. That is part of this whole stakeholder engagement process, and we will absolutely work closely with them to have these properties available—such as buildings that we are vacating as we move to new buildings, for example, and as we build new schools. This legislation was put in place so that we can do this work before the building is vacant and so that we can use that property and that building to its highest and best use. That is the power of being aligned and of being One Team One GNB. Thank you.

Mr. J. LeBlanc (Shediac—Beaubassin—Cap-Pelé, L): Mr. Speaker, many local governments lack the financial capacity to assume responsibility for fostering the development of affordable housing, which is so in need. Will the minister commit to providing local governments with funding to ensure that they can access incentive tools to spur on development of adequate and affordable housing?

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Maybe this is where I start to get bemused. I have never been called bemused before. As I talked about a lot yesterday, we are looking at all aspects of how we can engage with New Brunswickers and engage with

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our stakeholders—one, in particular, being the local governments—so that we can make sure that we build as much housing as we can each and every year. We are working with the skilled trades. We are working with Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour.

All these things are going to be included within the housing strategy that is coming out in June. It is six weeks away, maybe fewer. I welcome the feedback from my counterparts across the aisle. They have ideas and suggestions on what we need to include in our strategy. We are considering all the things that they have come up with. Thank you. We have more than what you guys have come up with. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HEALTH CARE

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, yesterday we debated Bill 40, *Health Facilities Act*, which gives the green light for further privatization of health care services in private surgical centres. Opponents fear this will cost taxpayers more while driving up costs and while public resources are being depleted. We voted against this bill, not because we are against surgeries being performed outside of hospitals but because evidence shows that a stronger model would be a publicly managed and operated connected network of ambulatory surgical centres that are fully integrated in the public system, with Health human resources coordination and with a centralized wait list.

This is not what is being presented to us. This minister has no plan and no vision. It is only piecemeal work that he is doing. We saw it with the bill last fall and now with the bill today. Will there be another bill next fall with the next piece of his little puzzle? Without a cohesive plan outlining a long-term vision and a coordinated approach for surgeries performed outside of a hospital setting, how does the minister think this approach will move the needle on improving access to surgical procedures?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much. I appreciate the question today. I think that goes to access to primary care, which is a pillar in the plan of this government for health care reform. That is one of the pieces in the bigger puzzle that go together. I know that you guys do not see the bigger picture sometimes, so I am going to lay it out for you.

On Monday I made an announcement at the Guardian drugstore in Riverview that allows pharmacists to assess and prescribe for a number of medical conditions, such as contact allergic dermatitis, cold sores, mild to moderate eczema, gastroesophageal reflux disease, impetigo, Lyme disease prevention after a high-risk bite, and mild acne. Pharmacies delivering those services to individuals who present themselves are going to free up a number of physicians in doctors' offices or emergency rooms to treat the more severe things. Does the opposition support this type of health care delivered by private companies?

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Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, Bill 40 has dangerous language, moving more health care services toward privatization. It is interesting because this week, there was a study that came out, published by the Parkland Institute that reviewed Alberta Health Services, which has contracts with more than 30 private providers listed on its website for eye surgeries, oral surgery, dermatology, joint replacement, and other surgeries that are being performed in private, for-profit clinics.

The study showed that pushing more surgeries into private clinics has not improved surgical wait times or helped to tackle the long wait lists in the province. In fact, the emphasis on for-profit surgical delivery in Alberta has resulted in a reduction of provincial surgical volumes and capacity in public hospitals. Resources are being depleted. It is costing more. The costs are going up. It shows that costs are ballooning by four times as much, in some cases, for taxpayers.

Does the minister share in the concern that by moving toward privatization, we will see costs go up and public resources depleted?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, again, there are examples. There is a concrete example of a private enterprise delivering access to primary care here in New Brunswick, which is freeing up appointments and preventing people from going to the emergency room to try to get treatment.

The items that I mentioned earlier are in addition to renewing prescriptions, prescribing medication for uncomplicated urinary tract infections, providing contraceptive management, assessing for and prescribing medicine for shingles, and assessing and prescribing the antiviral PAXLOVID for COVID-19.

So, the Liberal Party has to be clear on where it stands with respect to private enterprise delivering health services here in the province. The issues that are brought forward in the bill that I mentioned are services that will be paid for by Medicare. Individuals will not be paying for them. Here is a way that we can access primary care in this province, and it is having very, very positive effects. Do the Liberals support this move or not?

[Translation]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, I think the Minister of Health is getting ready for next year, when he will be in the opposition, since he is preparing his questions. We are ready to govern with a plan that makes sense and would ensure that wait times are reduced, human resources are not impacted negatively, and costs for taxpayers remain low. However, there are no safeguards to address these concerns in the private clinic plan the minister is proposing.

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[Original]

Mr. Speaker, the proof is in the pudding. When we look at a study that came out of Alberta, where there are 30 contracts with private clinics for a whole multitude of surgical procedures, we find that the costs to the taxpayers are being driven up and that it is just not working. Is the minister ready to look at those concerns and move to a more public model?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, I guess that I have to remind the critic opposite and the new Liberal leader that we are not in Alberta. We are in New Brunswick, and we have a New Brunswick-made health plan that is getting results. When you look at the hip and knee “long waiters” and the long list, you see they have been reduced by over 35%. Those are results. When you look at the long wait and the long list for cataract surgeries, you see those are down by more than 60%. Those are results.

The leader wants to pretend that we are in Alberta, but I will tell you, the bill that is on the floor will protect the people in New Brunswick because there has to be a relationship with the RHA and there has to be approval by the minister and it has to be paid for by Medicare. That is a New Brunswick solution that is getting results, which is unlike the folks over there who will not support moving forward in health care.

[Translation]

SEASONAL WORKERS

Mr. Mallet (Shippagan-Lamèque-Miscou, L): Mr. Speaker, one of the fishing seasons in my region, the crab fishing season, is going to end much earlier than anticipated. Now, processing plants employees are going to be working for no longer than 10 weeks. According to Statistics Canada, the unemployment rate in the Restigouche-Albert region is 9.6%, and people need to have worked 18 weeks to qualify for employment insurance.

Will the government consider a job support or creation program as soon as possible to help workers and support the economy in regions where work is seasonal?

Hon. Mrs. Johnson (Carleton-Victoria, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, PC): Mr. Speaker, this sector is working very hard to overcome environmental challenges and innovate with whale safe fishing gear. Fishers have been severely affected by market access, quota reductions, Hurricane Fiona, and, yes, the increase in fuel prices.

[Original]

Our fishers continue to provide delicious, nutritious, and safe proteins to the world, and we at DAAF are assisting them to gain access to that global market. We are working with our colleagues at PETL, we are working with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, and we

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are working with all agencies, which will help our crabbers, our lobstermen, and everyone in the fishing industry to make it a successful and sustainable industry.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Ms. Mitton (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): We need to act now to save the planet from surpassing an average global temperature increase of 1.5°C. Just yesterday, the World Meteorological Organization released data sounding the alarm that we will surpass 1.5°C in warming in 2027.

Quebec recently became the first jurisdiction in the world to explicitly ban oil and gas development. This will not only end petroleum exploration and production in Quebec but also ban the public financing of it. The Leader of the Green Party and member for Fredericton South has tabled a bill that would make New Brunswick a climate leader by becoming the second jurisdiction to ban oil and natural gas exploration and development. Will the Premier support this initiative to do what the science says we need to do and end our reliance on fossil fuels?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. Mr. Speaker, you know, I traveled to Europe last week and learned a lot about the state of the climate and the state of the energy issues in Europe. One of the things that were very relevant was certainly that I was within two hours of the Ukrainian crisis and conflict, which is now No. 4 or 5 on our news cycle, because we have lost that sense of urgency. So I want to talk about what I learned there about all the gaps that are in the system for energy security and energy supply. And we are not immune to that.

I want to go back to a point that the Leader of the Green Party made a few minutes ago, because the idea of every industry becoming greener and cleaner is being able to take advantage of, let's say, federal initiatives, like carbon credits, in a sense. We could really use the leader's help in relation to having the refinery here qualify for carbon credits, because it wants to invest in hydrogen production, Mr. Speaker, and that is where it is going to put the money. Every industry wants to do that and to be treated fairly by the federal rules. We could work together on something that will help reduce emissions here in our province now and going forward.

Ms. Mitton (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Mr. Speaker, what is it that this Premier does not get about leaving fossil fuels in the ground? What does this Premier not understand about the International Energy Agency saying that we must not build any new fossil fuel infrastructure? What is it that he does not get about the fact that fracking creates greenhouse gas emissions? It cannot be responsibly developed, despite what the Premier claims. To even consider it—when, to quote UN Secretary-General António Guterres, “we are headed for a global catastrophe”—is among the most irresponsible things you could do. It is reckless, and it is unacceptable.

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Considering the alarming warnings from scientists, the lack of consultation with First Nations, and the lack of social license from New Brunswickers, how can the Premier support the creation of a shale gas industry on unceded and unsurrendered Wabanaki territory?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, what I think needs to be understood in this conversation is: What are the current options to maintain energy security, and how do we reduce emissions at the same time? Not to get into the debate about shale gas development, but the companies I talked to in Europe are focused on LNG to shut down coal plants. It is the single biggest impact they can have on society while still providing energy. This can be done around the world, and here we are sitting with four or five coal plants running in Atlantic Canada. We could shut them down tomorrow or within a year and reduce emissions by 15-20%.

So, Mr. Speaker, for the whole issue, let's look at all the puts and takes in relation to energy supply. Let's look at how we transition and move, and let's look at how we can do this in the most productive way while reducing emissions all along the way and making it work. That is the challenge. We should all be looking at the same formula: How do we meet the challenges? We all have the same target: a cleaner and greener environment.

[Translation]

SEASONAL WORKERS

Mr. Mallet (Shippagan-Lamèque-Miscou, L): Mr. Speaker, as you know, a chain is made up of links, and, if one of them is weak, the chain breaks. Well, Mr. Speaker, the economy in my region, which is largely based on seasonal work, is like a chain: If one link breaks, the entire economy's financial chain will be affected.

Low seasonal employment rates in the fishing sector in my region and especially the lack of breakfast programs in our schools add another problem and undue stress for parents who work in the plants. Is the government going to address this situation as soon as possible and propose solutions to compensate for the lack of work weeks for plant workers?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. We certainly do want to understand the regional challenges within the schools and in the unemployment situation. We are looking for employment everywhere, in every sector and in every part of the province. I know that there are areas where that may certainly be more difficult, so we need to understand more fully what concerns are there and how to manage those concerns.

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I also think that we need to understand what is available. In working with the Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour and the employment groups, we need to say: What can we do to find longer-term employment availability so that we can keep more seasonal workers working longer? Basically, we need to work at that throughout the regions of our province because, once again, the challenge that we see and hear from all employers is that they need more people. They are saying: We need more people. That is a constant theme. It is a constant theme throughout the entire province, so let's look at all the factors and see what we can do to help this region. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

EDUCATION

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

[Original]

I am trying to process something that the Premier said earlier that I think reinforces the fact that we have a lack of direction, coherence, and leadership in Education right now. I think I understand from the Premier that he is suggesting that the union take responsibility for curriculum development at the same time that we have a bill on the floor that empowers the minister and the Premier's Office to put their hands into curriculum development. At the same time, the Premier is saying that he really wants parents to have a bigger role in curriculum development. I am hoping that you can clarify this for us. In New Brunswick, do you want a corporate model where the union is driving the curriculum, a political model where the Premier's Office is driving the curriculum, or a model where the civil servants and the experts are driving the curriculum?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I can understand why the Leader of the Opposition would find all of this confusing. The situation that we have here is that all New Brunswickers—every single one of them—need to play a role in their kids' education and no one has a time-out. No one should claim the Fifth and say that it is not their responsibility, especially the NBTA, which represents the entire teaching staff. No one should claim the Fifth and say, It is not my child. Yes, it is. It is your child that is going to this school, and you need to be part of their education and understand what they are learning, when they are learning it, and how they are learning it. And we in here need to listen in order to say: We are not making the rules about what you are being taught. We want you to tell us what kids need to know to cope in today's society.

Mr. Speaker, we need to do this in a way so that every single child is represented, understood, and coveted because we want the best for every single one of them. Yes, it is

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confusing—I understand that—but this is an obligation that we all share. Let's not make it more difficult than it is. Let's just get on with it and say: We can do better.

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): The Premier continues to reinforce a lack of coherence in Education. We have him saying that parents should take responsibility, but we have Bill 46 landing on the floor, which removes that responsibility. The word salad does not address this. We have the Premier saying that the teachers' union should take responsibility, but the contract negotiations with that body have stalled.

If I go back to the platform and to the lovely letter that the Premier wrote when he was asking New Brunswickers to elect him, he said that from his time in Finance, he learned another lesson. He said: "Today there is too much power in the Premier's office... The only way to change the system is for someone with a different approach to sit in that office."

Does the Premier still feel that way today?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition would know all about sitting in that office. She sat in the office for four years. I think that the Jobs Board Secretariat was in one of the titles. How did that work out? There was a tax agreement that really created a huge economic divide in the province. The Leader of the Opposition was there at that time. We had a government that was all focused on basically how much money it could spend and how many announcements it could make. I think that the Leader of the Opposition was there then.

Mr. Speaker, if we want to talk about the discussion that has led up to today... The Leader of the Opposition said: Oh, I want to do politics differently. Well, I will question and defy anyone who suggests that we have not done politics differently. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the COVID-19 Cabinet committee was unlike anywhere in the country. It worked with the civil service to drive changes in our province—different than any other.

Our province is now being looked at, with people asking: What is going on in New Brunswick? Well, we are on the move, and only the Liberals could turn that around.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Question period is over.